

**Story-Branding by Empire Entrepreneurs:  
Nike, Child Labour, and Pakistan's Soccer Ball Industry**

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Our study identifies and calls for an answerability-ethic of storytelling where entrepreneurs are held responsible and accountable for the harmful ways in which they story the Third World. We study a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative involving Nike in the Third World. Our study draws upon interview and textual study of the *Sialkot Child Labour Elimination Project* that was signed in Atlanta, Georgia on February 1997. We find that Nike's CSR stories not only brand products but they also brand Third World labour. Our study's main contribution is to show that entrepreneur's branding through story telling their 'benign' CSR initiatives in the Third World, an activity we term 'story-branding', has an imperial face requiring the use of power to turn workers voiceless (make them into subalterns).

**KEY WORDS:**        **story-branding, corporate social responsibility, child labour, Nike, entrepreneurship, postcolonialism**

## **Story-Branding by Empire Entrepreneurs: Nike, Child Labour, and Pakistan's Soccer Ball Industry**

### **Introduction**

Storytelling is a primary way entrepreneurs maintain the currency of their reputation. While marketing and corporate reputation literatures recognize that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a vital component of a company's brand strategy (Chun, 2005), the role of story is not being addressed by them. Entrepreneurs strengthen their brands through telling stories about their CSR initiatives. Such CSR stories improve the image of entrepreneurs with consumers, help them gain legitimacy for their labour practices, and assist them in attracting other resources required for their continued success (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Zott and Huy, 2007). However, this literature on entrepreneurship and branding is limited in that it ignores the effects of entrepreneurs and their legitimating story work on the poor and powerless in the Third World where many entrepreneurs base their supply chains and where they situate their CSR initiatives.

We address this limitation by connecting entrepreneurship and branding literature to postcolonialism, a field that looks at the effects of colonization on societies and cultures, particularly in the Third World (Westwood, 2006). We bring the great postcolonial theorist Edward Said's (1978, 1993, 1994) concern about the plight of the Third World to the centre of entrepreneurship studies and direct it to what is most marginalized in branding and entrepreneurship studies: Third World worker voices. Creating space for these voices leads us to a more critical reading of the literature on entrepreneurs and branding. Through this reading, we articulate a new term called 'story-branding' that helps surface the imperial face of the branding process.

Story-branding, our paper's main contribution, is defined as entrepreneurs strengthening their brands by putting into play a characterization of events relating to a CSR initiative in the Third World that ends up branding one set of actors (entrepreneurs and their organizations) as heroes who rescue other characters. The focus of this form of story telling is on the entrepreneur as hero in an adventurous story saga. Just as with imperialism and its heroic 'civilizing' mission (Ahmad, 2000; Blaut, 1993), the consequences of that adventure for people in the Third World are simply left out of the narrative. In terms of the study we present, Nike, the heroic entrepreneur, rescues Third World families from child labour in Pakistan's soccer ball industry. The remedy Nike, other global brands, and various agencies, implemented to remove child labour did not include the voices of the children, or their parents, who, in our study, had an entirely different characterization of their work experience. Neither in Nike's story-branding was any mention made of the harmful effects that ensued from its heroic rescue mission. What our analysis of the imperial face of branding suggests is a disturbing dark-side to this entrepreneurial activity which is overlooked in previous studies that otherwise treat the phenomenon as heroic or romantic adventure storytelling.

Through our study of story-branding regarding a CSR initiative in the Third World, we find that the literature on entrepreneurship and branding fails to notice that in CSR storytelling done to brand products, Third World labour is being branded as well. In the classical definition of branding, it is being burned, like prisoners or cattle, with identifying marks (e.g., grateful for CSR when opposite is the case) that are injurious to it and which facilitate its exploitation. Branding has thus an imperial face of imposing

identifying marks to permit injury and disgrace for the people in the Third World who make the products of First World entrepreneurs.

A related contribution is to identify an additional ethical dimension in entrepreneurship revealed by story-branding: the ethical inquiry into corporate 'answerability' for the stories of Third World workers being branded in story characterizations. Entrepreneurs need to be held answerable for the consequences of the highly compelling stories they tell. If indeed, as we argue, such branding-stories do contribute to late capitalism's ongoing imperial project that otherwise is crushing to worker's dignity in the third.

Our article is organized as follows. First, we explore postcolonialism and its concern with the inhabitants of the Third World made voiceless. Second, we briefly lay out our methods for our case study of the CSR initiative 'The Sialkot Child Labour Elimination Project' involving Nike and other global soccer ball brands. We then present our case study where we do our best to open spaces for subaltern voices, women soccer ball stitchers, regarding this initiative. After this, we reflect upon Nike's imperial face and discuss how these subalternized voices problematize our understandings on branding through CSR initiatives situated in the Third World. This leads to ethics and we argue that there needs to be storytelling answerability. Entrepreneurs need to be held answerable for the stories they tell for they brand not just products but also people. We conclude with our paper's contributions and future research directions opened up by our inquiry that treats entrepreneurship's branding activities through postcolonial sensitivities.

## POSTCOLONIALISM & THE SUBALTERN

Postcolonialism has advanced many insightful concepts to make sense of Europe's post 1492 engagement with (some would say onslaught against) the Third World. One such concept that has generated much theoretical mileage is the term 'Subaltern'.

The word subaltern, though coined by Gramsci, was popularized by a group of Indian historians in the 1980s (Prasad, 2003). This group came to be known as the '*Subaltern Studies collective*' with Ranajit Guha being perhaps its most notable member (Chakrabarty, 2002). Subalterns, meant all those weak and marginalized elements (i.e., the poor masses) ignored in the mainstream narrative of history that focuses on elites and their motives and actions to explain historical events. The collective sought to rewrite Indian history from the perspective of these groups, to write a people's history of India. The research that ensued contested several claims of mainstream Indian history. In contrast to the then prevailing view of Indians being united in a common cause against the British, the Subaltern Studies research pointed out that there were severe class-based conflicts between the leadership elements of Indian nationalism and their grassroots who often had a different vision of India than their leaders (e.g., one that preserves their local, rural culture as opposed to a high-modern industrialized vision of India held by such Indian nationalist leaders as Nehru; Chakrabarty, 2002, Roy, 1999; for a concise history on the Subaltern Studies collective, see Chakrabarty, 2002; and Ludden, 2001; for an outstanding example of subaltern research looking at workplace and organizational dynamics, see Chakrabarty, 1983).

In the 1990s the term subaltern came to take on a more specific meaning as it came to be appropriated by postcolonial studies (Prasad, 2003). From being used as a term to refer to the subordinated masses in general, it began to be used to depict specifically those classes or individuals within them who are spoken about but never heard (Ludden, 2001, 2001a; Prasad, 2003) in contrast to other subordinated groups (e.g., tribals in India) that do not even make it to the realm of public discussion (Roy, 1999).

Sensitivity to subalterns and subalternization should alert us to their possibilities in other domains characterized by massive imbalances of power. CSR initiatives in the Third World could well be such domains where the multi-billion dollar global transnational corporation is engaged with penniless workers. They become subalterns or peripheral-centres of the CSR initiative: They are central to the initiative but in terms of having their voice heard and their interests fairly represented and realized, they become ignored.

This seems to have happened in our study of a CSR initiative undertaken by Nike and other brands to eradicate child labour from soccer ball production. Before we present our study, we would like to make a brief note on methods.

## **METHODS**

The majority of the world's soccer balls have, for decades, been produced in Sialkot, Pakistan, with leading international brands (e.g. Nike and Adidas) sourcing almost exclusively from Sialkot. Estimates of the number of stitchers employed in Sialkot's soccer ball manufacturing cluster varied from a low of just over 30,000 (International Monitoring Association for Child Labour (IMAC) 2003) to a high of 65,000 (Awan, 1996: 5). The great majority of children helped their parents at home who were in turn paid for the number of soccer balls rather than hours worked — an ILO estimate placing the number of children at approximately 15,000 (Husselbee, 2001: 133; ILO 1999). Most of these balls were stitched

in homes (mostly in the 1,600 odd villages surrounding Sialkot). Balls reached these homes through an elaborate chain of subcontractors.

In this study, we chose a qualitative storytelling inquiry research design. This was in keeping with standard research practice of doing storytelling studies (Boje, 1991, 1995, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000). The focus of the study was to ascertain the stories of the most subjugated segment of Pakistani society, involved in the soccer ball industry: women soccer ball stitchers.

Main sources of data were interviews and documents. Between November 2000 and October 2003, the second author (SA from hereon) made three extended field trips to Sialkot, Pakistan. Interviews were conducted with Pakistani soccer ball factory owners, staff of NGOs working on the project to eliminate child labour, male and female soccer ball stitchers as well as children affected by the project. Each interview was semi-structured and lasted on average about 80 minutes. The longest was about three hours. A total of a 110 respondents participated in the interviews, with 50 of them being women stitchers. At the close of each interview, stitchers were asked questions about exercising agency (voice) and any constraints experienced in doing so. NGO personnel were asked about the visible absence of stitchers' voices in the design and implementation of the project.

Apart from interviews, several other sources of information were used, including newspaper stories, internal organizational documents (emails, faxes, memos, letters, project evaluation reports, meeting minutes), US Department of Labor (DOL) hearings, legal archives, public fact-finding reports, internet documents, and surveys published by the child labour project organizations. In total, this comprised 10,000 text pages. It was supplemented by video documentaries about Sialkot child labour issues, and a quantitative database of an NGO with basic demographic information on 2,000 stitching families.

The aim of our data analysis was to contrast the perspectives of Nike, other global soccer brands, and their trade associations with the accounts told by members of stitching

families. The intertextuality of documents and interviews allowed for corroboration of threads (or themes) across storied accounts among multiple sources. This was done in an iterative fashion, comparing what stitchers were saying against the other accounts. Next we examine the basic findings of the study as they relate to branding and entrepreneurship.

### **NIKE'S CSR & SIALKOT CHILD LABOUR**

Nike is a recognized entrepreneurial organization, and Phil Knight, the founder, is known as an entrepreneur who changed the sports apparel industry. As the mass media brought child labour in soccer ball making to the attention of the world, the heroic entrepreneur story was in jeopardy. Nike's branding of itself as heroic adventurer needed a facelift. Nike, and its apologists, therefore branded its CSR initiative as a form of Third World mother and child-emancipation. This served to return the romantically heroic entrepreneurial face to Nike and Phil Knight. We will review, briefly, how the controversy emerged, and then trace the responses of various parties involved.

*The Child Labour Crisis.* On April 6, 1995, CBS aired at prime time a short documentary on the soccer ball industry in Sialkot 'Children at work' (CBS transcripts, 1995). The CBS story forcefully brought to the fore the unsettling irony of poor children at work so rich American kids could play. The CBS story was picked up by the other mass media both in the US and abroad. The result was an international media firestorm, doling out a blitz of moral penalties to the global soccer ball industry for being found in bed with child labour.

Our next point is controversial. We believe that, from the villager's point of view, (and studies conducted within Pakistan), that the stories being framed about widespread child labour exploitation were grossly exaggerated. Specifically, in 1995, the *Human*

*Rights Commission of Pakistan* published a comprehensive report challenging the veracity of allegations being made about the soccer ball industry. Such reports agreed that wages were exploitative, but refuted the main charges leveled by the media: the prevalence of bonded child labour, work place beatings of children, children working predominately in unsafe workshops for long hours, and differential wages for children and adults. Children were actually working part-time, earning the same rates as adults, in the comforts of their homes with their families who were all jointly stitching the soccer balls.<sup>1</sup>

The problem, from a narrative perspective, is that once a story (even one with inaccurate or exaggerated claims) is treated as gospel, it is very difficult to reverse the effect of a media firestorm. The media did not consult the village-workers, and letting them voice their side of the story, nor did the media wait for more rigorous and systematic study, before demanding change. Momentum builds legitimacy to just go with the more popularized version of the story (without counterstory consideration). A snowball spin effect ensued. For example, on June 28, 1996, with official endorsement of the US Department of Labor and prominent politicians (e.g., Joseph P. Kennedy II), a campaign was launched to bring an immediate end to child labour in Sialkot's soccer ball industry. The campaign came to be known as the '*Foul Ball Campaign*' coordinated by the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) (a Washington based labour advocacy group) in cooperation with a network of labour, consumer, religious, sports, and child advocacy groups (US Department of Labor, 2003).

*Nike Responds?* Nike's initial response to the crisis is difficult to trace given contradictory statements issued by it on this matter, at various points in time. For example, from a written deposition to the US Department of Labor hearings held on June 28, 1996, Nike seems to have begun sourcing production of soccer balls in Sialkot in 1995 (US Department of Labor, 1996). The deposition states that after they began soccer ball production in Sialkot (i.e., perhaps in the Fall of 1995), Nike 'implemented more steps to protect worker rights than companies that have operated in the country for decades' (cited in *ibid*). The deposition goes on to state that at Nike's insistence its supplier (Saga Sports) began to ensure child-free production by establishing stitching centres that could be easily monitored, unlike homes in disparate villages, to ensure that no children were involved in the production.

The story given by Phil Knight, the founder of Nike, gives a different version. Knight, speaking to the National Press Club on April 12, 1998, said:

In 1994 Jack Beecraft (ph) of our Singapore office flew into Sialkot, Pakistan to check out the first ever Nike soccer ball order. What he found was conditions that were not acceptable. What he found was the conditions that did not meet Nike's code of conduct, and were not controllable, because essentially for 50 years the Pakistan soccer ball industry had been made up of a process in which the ball uppers were sent out into a cottage industry into -- with very little controls on who the upper were sewn by, and they in fact, were sewn by children, old people, blind

people, under all kinds of bad conditions. Basically seeing this he said that is not acceptable under the way we do business, and he and Mr. Sufi (ph) got together in Beverton, Oregon three months later to hack out a different way of making soccer balls in Pakistan. (cited in Federal Document Clearing House, 1998).

Phil Knight's version would tend to indicate that the response began as early as 1994. However, on another occasion, at roughly the same time he gave the above speech, Phil Knight seems to have shown little concern over work-age issues. In the documentary film, *The Big One*, the following conversation occurred between Michael Moore, the film maker, and Phil Knight:

Moore: 'Twelve-year-olds working in factories? That's okay with you?'

Knight: 'They're not 12-year-olds. The minimum age is 14.'

Moore: 'How about 14, then? Doesn't that bother you?'

Knight: 'No.' (cited in Miller, 1998).

Traces of the attitude displayed in the above interview can be found as far back as 1996 in Nike, thus, suggesting that Knight was not making a one-off statement but articulating a long-held attitude in Nike. For example, when confronted in 1996 with evidence that children were involved in the making of Nike soccer balls, Nike spokeswoman, Donna Gibbs, defended the company saying "it's an ages old practice [and] the process of change is going to take time. Too often, well-intentioned human

rights groups can cause dramatic negative effects if they scare companies into stopping production and the kids are thrown out on the street.” (cited in Schanberg, 1996: 42). In that same interview, she had acknowledged that her company had not implemented, till that point, its stated goal of child labour free soccer ball production. Given that Nike did not contest this account of their corporate behaviour by Schanberg, this seems to suggest that such views were indeed articulated and the quotes were not taken out of context. Also, in other places Gibbs expressed Nike’s gradual approach to the child labour issue by stating that the problem is a large one, in her words, “Child labour is really an epidemic in Pakistan” (Denby, 1997), which by implication would mean that a substantial expense of time would be needed to address it, reflecting a position that was already expressed explicitly in Schanberg’s interview.

We tend to get three different stories from these Nike sources, suggesting that if we were to find additional accounts of Nike’s own response to the child labour crisis, we would perhaps also find more different stories of Nike’s response to this crisis. Based on the texts, at hand, dating Nike’s response seem to be range from anywhere from 1994, predating the media-crisis, to around Fall 1995, a few months after its outbreak. Also, as can be seen, accounts differ on the urgency felt by Nike in tackling this matter, with Phil Knight’s and Department of Labor versions indicating that when the company became aware, it changed course immediately while the Gibbs version indicates that the course reversal was a gradual one.

All the accounts do agree, however, on one count. None of them contain any evidence to suggest that Nike provided any material assistance to its supplier, Saga Sports

as the latter went through the costly process of building child-free stitching centres with health dispensaries and other such worker facilities.

*The Sialkot Child Labour Project.* Nike moved through its industry associations (e.g., World Federation of Sporting Goods Industry [WFSGI]) to stave off consumer pressure by enacting an industry-wide solution to the child labour problem. On February 14, 1997 at the SuperShow (one of the two annual international trade fairs of the sporting goods industry) in Atlanta (Georgia) the global soccer ball industry unveiled at a press conference its ‘final solution’ to the child labour crisis that had been plaguing it for almost two years. The industry announced ‘The Atlanta Agreement’ which stated that a project, the Sialkot Child Labour Elimination Project, would be jointly established by the Sialkot Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) to phase out children from Pakistan’s soccer ball industry in the next 18 months. The US Department of Labor would be its main donor.

At that press conference, Nike’s industry association representatives claimed the high moral ground stating that this CSR initiative reflected industry’s own unswerving commitment to ethical business practices. Stephen Rubin, WFSGI President, in his speech, made the following remarks:

The soccer community has asked for reassurance that child labour has no place in producing the soccer balls used in neighbourhood sandlots or national stadiums. This new partnership is an unprecedented response to that concern.

For the first time ever – in any industry, in any part of the world – local manufacturers, global brands and internationally respected children's organizations have agreed to work together to address child labour in a responsible manner (cited in PR Newswire, 1997).

The Sialkot Child Labour Elimination Project announced at that press conference began to be implemented in October 1997 (ILO 1997). Child labour was to be phased out by shifting the stitching of balls, the activity in which children were involved, to monitorable stitching centres (ibid). The stitching centres are factories or workshops that, unlike village homes, could be more readily accessed by ILO monitors in order to verify that no children were involved in stitching soccer balls. The project also incorporated a social protection program. Its purpose was to take care of the displaced child stitchers and their affected families by creating alternative income opportunities, largely through micro-credit schemes and vocational training (e.g., tailoring) (Crawford 2001). Education of children was to be provided either by enrolling them in government schools or setting up one to three room education centres where they would be educated up to grade 5 on a few hours a day basis (Save the Children 2000; ILO-IPEC 1999; Bunyad Literacy Community Council 1998).

Two years later, Nike and the soccer ball industry announced mission accomplished when US President Bill Clinton gave it the following ringing endorsement:

Let me cite just one example of the success being achieved, the work being done to eliminate child labor from the soccer ball industry in Pakistan. Two years ago, thousands

of children under the age of 14 worked for 50 companies stitching soccer balls full-time. The industry, the ILO and UNICEF joined together to remove children from the production of soccer balls and give them a chance to go to school, and to monitor the results.

Today, the work has been taken up by women in 80 poor villages in Pakistan, giving them new employment and their families new stabilities. Meanwhile, the children have started to go to school, so that they come of age, they will be able to do better jobs raising the standard of living of their families, their villages and their nation. I thank all who were involved in this endeavour and ask others to follow their lead. (Clinton, 1999).

Clinton's speech sums up the CSR storytelling spun by Nike and its industry associations. Child labour was identified by the media and industry took action to remove it. Others should 'follow their lead'.

In sum, Nike Corporation (and the Atlanta Program organizations) came off as caring and responsible entrepreneurs providing schooling to Third World children and jobs for their mothers. Nike's CSR initiative was to spin the controversy, branding themselves, as mother and child emancipators. This rescued the romanticized and heroic entrepreneurial face of Nike's branding from the media firestorm. Next, we reanalyze the

sides of the story presented, from a postcolonial perspective. We turn next to our analysis of the implementation of the Sialkot Child Labour Elimination Project.

### **TELLING THE POSTCOLONIAL SIDE OF NIKE STORY-BRANDING**

In Nike's CSR story-branding, the focus was on doing something beneficial for the mothers, fathers, and children stitching soccer balls in their homes. A postcolonial question needs to be asked: what became of them? We contend the families are the subalterns of the storytelling. President Clinton mentions them in passing, but no voices is given in his or the other accounts, reviewed thus far.

Reviewers and readers, may be wondering about our intent here. We are not arguing that child labour is a good thing. Nor, are we making the case the Pakistan soccer ball industry must do away with stitching centers and go back to the old way of production, village families stitching soccer balls in the privacy of their homes. Rather, we are making the case that corporations, agencies, and anti-child labour activists and exposé journalists did not adequately investigate or provide a forum for villager families to tell their side of the story.

Therefore, we next attempt to reclaim voices of the families, by talking to them, and to NGO personnel, who were on the ground, doing the work of the Atlanta Program. What we learn from their reflexivity is that the story-branding and the Atlanta Program had destructive consequences for the stitching families.

The authors' move is to claim an 'answerability ethic' (Bakhtin, 1990, 1991). There is a question of being answerable for the story told, for how it brands (characterizes) workers, leaves them voiceless in program design, and fails to examine how corporate (and apologist) storytelling has dire consequences for the voiceless

workers. Corporations, their apologists, as well as the media are in a powerful position, being able to tell and disseminate highly compelling stories that bring with them demands for action (interventions into lives of the Other i.e., the poor and powerless in the Third World).

The project turned out to be a largely a top-down affair. Most of NGO personnel interviewed, were of the opinion that there was effectively no participation in the project of the local stitching communities. To illustrate this point, an NGO worker stated:

Not consult them in design, just in implementation... Guess involvement highly restricted to just your choice whether you want to go to the doctor or you would like the doctor to come to you. That is the extent of their participation. Some [NGOs] do not even ask them these questions but just give them directives.

Internal minutes of Project coordination committee (PCC) meetings referred to stitchers as ‘targets’, things to be acted upon, never as persons who should be directly participating in the PCC deliberations, which were after all, what everyone says they were concerned about. In the internal records reviewed, when stakeholders were mentioned, the ‘stitchers’ were conspicuously absent from all their lists. An internal project communication strategy draft, for example, lists the following stakeholders to whom information about the project should be constantly communicated:

Firstly the media, both national and international, who in turn, serve the public. Secondly, the various interested

NGOs, such as human rights groups, employers' organizations, trade unions, etcetera. (Husselbee, David (1997). *Draft II: Communication Strategy Sialkot Soccer Ball Project* (Internal Project Document). Sialkot: Save the Children).

Not only in internal documents were stitchers absent, but also often in public documents. For example, in Save the Children's public report, stitchers were noticeably absent from listing relevant project stakeholders:

The findings have been shared with all the stakeholders including international brands, trade unions, the media, human rights groups, NGOs, and government agencies. (2000a: 13).

Given that stitchers, in the mental frameworks of the policy makers, were either inanimate 'targets' or simply absent referents, the conclusion of Save the Children's project evaluation report concerning stitcher participation need not unduly surprise us:

In Sialkot, a number of stakeholders did not play strong roles within the partnership. These are: the community (including working children and their families), Trade Unions and Government. (Crawford, 2001: 12-13).

There is a major answerability issue here: stitchers had been kept largely clueless about all that was taking place in their name.

When the second author would ask them to describe the project, the stitchers answered with blank stares. Their alienation from the project sometimes took on surreal

proportions. For example, parents and children sitting in a project-established Non-Formal Education Centre (NFE) (1-3 room affairs where children were imparted basic education up to grade 5 on a part-time basis) did not know that the centre was established as part of the child labour project, much to the embarrassment of the NGO field worker that had helped to establish the NFE and had impressed upon the second author prior to arrival at the NFE how much work his NGO had done in imparting to stitcher families information about the project. Similarly, the stitchers belonging to a microcredit community organization could not for the life in them provide any information about the project, especially its origin and scope.

While the project was imposed from above, it did produce the results that Western consumer sentiment had bayed for. The project had by 2003 been successful in phasing out children from 95% of all soccer ball production (IMAC, 2003). It had effectively made the industry child labour free and in that process won international acclaim (Clinton, 1999). But the *victory ball* came at the expense of the stitching families, particularly women.

*Project Consequences on the Stitchers.* To assess the impact of the project on women stitchers, it is important to first depict their socio-economic condition. The latter is intricately tied to their profession: soccer ball stitching. This profession is at the lowest rung of the soccer ball production supply chain ladder in terms of wages. Even if two parents were stitching soccer balls, satisfying basic needs is an ever elusive prospect. As a Save the Children report, based on a survey of 100 villages, stated, ‘Both adults and

children pointed out that most adults were working as hard as they could but still could not make ends meet' (1997: 2).

Women stitchers thus live an impoverished existence even though the balls they stitch generate riches for their Sialkot manufacturers and their international brands. To this economic plight is added the burden of sheer disdain with which stitching work is looked upon by village culture. Surveys from various reports attest to this fact. For example, a Punjab Rural Support Programme report states as one of its findings that 'stitching is considered an inferior source of income.' (Punjab Rural Support Programme, 2002: 5). But again how is this cryptic statement digested in the existence of those who endure it. The women stitchers that were interviewed felt visibly ashamed at being soccer ball stitchers. This was apparent in groups that contained more affluent women who in the group setting would boast that no members of their family stitched soccer balls.

The lot of women stitchers, and stitching families in general, is quite impressively captured in the following words of a widow of a leading Sialkot soccer ball baron, who after conducting a door to door survey of 403 stitchers comprising one-third of her stitching work force, the majority of whom were women (56.4%), said in a speech to her family firm's international buyer:

The stitching families frequently took advance payment from the contractor as they received no social security cover, no provident fund, no pension fund provision, no bonus payment, no profit sharing . . . The income from football stitching was simply too little to cater for any medical emergency. With great difficulty could they

maintain all their children in school and pay for books and uniforms. Almost all had debts. I was informed that help with educational expenditure and medical care was the most pressing need, followed by others such as: repair work to their homes damaged during the rainy season, dowry for the girls when they get married, toilets, a pump, fans, electricity meter. (Khawaja, 2002: 2).

The world of women stitchers is, thus, one of necessity and desperation. Not surprisingly the burning issue for women stitchers is a living wage. Surveys conducted on stitchers, both men and women, from 1997 onwards attest to this statement. Important workplace issues, such as living wage were kept off the agenda. The only focus was to get children out of the industry.

As remedy, a trickle-down approach was deployed using microcredit, school enrolment drives and informal education centres. The problem, however, is that such solutions ended up missing the vast majority of the women stitchers and their families (Crawford, 2001). Moreover, it seems that none of these social protection programs could be made sustainable; the education centres have been begun to be wound up, so their impact, while beneficial for the few families who came into their safety nets, are transient at best for the rest of the women stitching population. With the income generation and education programs having largely missed the bulk of stitching families that were affected by the project, the lot of the women stitchers seems not to have improved in any substantive way by all the project work carried out in their name to

benefit them. Most importantly, the project, by establishing monitorable stitching centres, in which the International Labour Organization (ILO) could check to see whether children were stitching, actually worsened their plight.

One has to ask if the Atlanta Project is being answerable for the current situation? The new monitorable centre regime exposed women stitchers to verbal abuse. Working at home gave them privacy and provided them with the convenience of not exposing themselves as soccer ball stitchers after which come the slurs and the derogatory comments made by their fellow villagers. Now having to commute to work, it was difficult for them to hide that they belonged to the lowly soccer ball stitcher class. One woman stitcher, nostalgic about home-based stitching, sighed, ‘Before you could earn with respect at home.’ Respect is important for women and the visible daily commute to centres opened up their self-respects for scathing verbal assaults by villagers, particularly men. One woman stitcher, despite her precarious economic situation, left working in centres because she could no longer tolerate such abuse. She recollects her centre stitching experience as follows:

If we go to factories, people say nasty things about us.  
[They say] Putting red lipstick, going out, what do you  
have in mind. [We] do it [stitching] out of necessity.  
Common feeling [in villages] is that if one cannot do  
anything [one is useless] then stitch. No respect in village.

Home-based stitching thus saved women from verbal abuse. At times, it also provided them protection from physical sexual abuse. One former Save the Children officer, a Sialkot village resident himself, points out that sexual harassment, including

rape, was as an important factor that made women overwhelmingly refuse working at centres even at the pain of severe economic deprivation:

[A] big stitching centre of [organization name concealed] that provided pick and drop facilities. We told women why not go there. But women were being exploited there, sexually. [The centre] had all male staff. Had middle woman would act as middle person. [She would] get girls to agree and then [the girls] taken to head office. This information went back to villages. Women not want to work. They reacted by stopping to come.

The women stitchers who made the hard migration to stitching centres, whether in their own villages or in remote locations, form at best maybe 20% of the pre-project women stitching workforce. The remainder refused to make such a migration out of a variety of predispositions, the three most prominent being self-respect, obligations at the home, or due to permission not being given by their men folk to commute to work. Regardless, their stance has come at a vicious material cost to them. A woman stitcher at her home angrily said:

Wages are poor. We have children. Work hard to earn bread. We get money on times [from subcontractor] sometimes. Ten years [I have been] stitching. If I protest, there are 1000 people willing to stitch. [Subcontractor will] say fine. You do not want to work, [I will] give it to others.

Another woman stitcher described the drastic drop in orders coming to the village in the following way: “Before we used to get 2 balls, now get 1 ball. If before we get 1 ball, now make half”.

Though wage rates initially increased for male stitchers at centres, they were not enough to compensate for the loss of income suffered by women and children now unable to stitch. Overall, household incomes fell in absolute terms. All this happened while the project received international accolades for its humanitarian concerns and the US presidential seal of approval. The women stitchers would have truly wondered if they indeed were the ones being described by Bill Clinton in his ringing endorsement. This is branding’s imperial face.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our case study shows that while Nike and other global concerns branded themselves through their story-branding as socially responsible actors they were simultaneously branding Third World workers (i.e., soccer ball stitchers, particularly women) in a manner that were distorting their realities and denigrating their concerns (e.g., of a living wage) as superfluous and irrelevant, not even fit for mentioning. This is what we call the imperial face of branding. Like branding cattle, the poor soccer ball stitching families were branded with identification markers hurtful and injurious to them, but serviceable to their ‘masters’. They were branded as recipients of a ‘civilizing mission’ with women going to work and children going to school. They were branded as being rescued from the scourge of child labour. This branding was required so that Nike could parade its brand as a responsible corporate citizen celebrating freedom for women

and children. That the brand was ‘the proverbial emperor is not wearing any clothes’ has gone without commentary during the past decade. For the voices that could shatter this still ongoing illusion had been placed at the margins and subalternized.

This seemingly imperial face of branding requires subalternization (of women stitcher voicelessness) to perpetuate the image-management strategy. It requires high imbalance of resources between limited voices of workers and the well-funded voices of corporate entrepreneurs. The stitchers also lack access to legal/political, cultural and economic resources; and, to our knowledge, no attempt was made by NGOs, for example, to attenuate this situation. The ‘foreigners’ could fly into Sialkot but representatives of the stitchers could not readily travel to the ILO offices in Geneva to convey their concerns and grievances. Communications regarding the design and implementation of the project were conducted in English and little or no effort was made to inform the stitchers of the international controversy and the nature of the response being prepared. Lacking any kind of capital, symbolic or material, the largely illiterate stitchers were handicapped in gaining access to, let alone becoming involved, in agenda setting processes and negotiations over their fate.

Readers may be interested in recent developments in Sialkot’s soccer industry. On November 20, 2006, Nike announced it ended production with Saga Sports, its Pakistani soccer ball supplier.<sup>2</sup> Two child workers were found to be making soccer balls: “Nike discovered widespread unauthorized outsourcing of its products from Saga facilities, resulting in the production of Nike soccer balls inside homes in the Sialkot area” (ibid). On May 24, 2007, Nike announced it had resumed production in Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> The new subcontractor factory, Silver Star Group, made an agreement to not use any part-time

workers (or home-based producers) in its soccer ball manufacture. We point out that, once again, the village families (workers) did not have voice in working out the arrangements.

There is another more invisible form of power at work. The post 1492 encounter of Europe with the Third World, over half a millennium into its running, has established certain scripts and certain ways of relating to the Third World that are taken for granted in the dominant Western culture as normal (Blaut, 1993). One such script is that it is normal for Third World matters to be decided in Western centres (Said, 1978, 1992, 1993). The Ottoman Empire was severed in meetings in Paris. The Sialkot village family economy was ripped apart in decisions taken in Geneva, Zurich, London, Atlanta, and Munich, to name a few of the cities where the blueprint of the project was articulated. The agreement that ushered in the project was called the ‘Atlanta’ Agreement, not the Sialkot Agreement, even though the agreement was primarily about Sialkot’s poor soccer ball stitchers. Imagine how odd it would look if an equally intrusive project that would disrupt something so private as the household division of labour in a major North American or European city was called the ‘Sialkot Agreement’ where all the key decisions were made by individuals neither from Europe nor North America. That the Atlanta Agreement does not sound odd to us only testifies to the hold the culture of imperialism has over our common sense. As long as that imperial common sense holds, so too will subalternization of Third World voices. Decisions will continue to be made as matter of routine and normalcy far away from the reach of ‘natives’. The imperial face of branding will continue to be enacted not having to worry about overcoming insurgent voices from below. They simply will not make it to the gate.

This link of imperialism and entrepreneurship has, to our knowledge, not been made or explored in any explicit fashion in the literature that discusses entrepreneurship and branding. Our analysis leads us to propose that branding CSR stories that subalternize Third World voices are crucially dependent on imperial motifs. Without the imperial history that socialized us into a Eurocentric perspective with Old and New Europe (North America) as the key decision making centre for the rest of the world (Blaut, 1993), we find it difficult to imagine that the ‘Atlanta’ Agreement pronouncing on Sialkot could have been conceived with so little awkwardness and so little participation from the people of Sialkot. Without the cultural residue of imperialism, it would appear as nonsensical as our hypothetical Sialkot Agreement.

While we suffer distress on account of the CSR subalternizing stories told by Nikes and others propping themselves on the culture of empire, we are horrified when we contemplate that doing so helps reproduce and circulate the culture of empire. To the extent that Nike’s stories embody imperial attitudes (e.g., treating as unremarkable the absence of ‘natives’ from decision-making arenas which are kept far from the Third World) they contribute towards what we call, slightly paraphrasing Hannah Arendt, ‘the banality of empire’. Such attitudes find a new lease being circulated and presented not just by government discourse but by the powerful image machineries of Nike and other global brands. The constant repetition and ubiquitous presence of these stories churned out by corporate image machines make imperial attitudes found in them so common place and banal that they are taken for granted. In this fashion, we feel that the Third World branding in CSR stories may well be contributing to making the Third World vulnerable to Western aggression by normalizing and making self-evident the ‘right’ of

the West to intervene and speak for the Third World. A right that is rarely questioned in respectable circles of policy and debate. If Atlanta can decide on Sialkot, can not Washington decide on Iraq? The question is not of 'if' (we can intervene) but of 'when'.

Moreover, such story-telling is flawed when the voices of the workers are ignored. We propose a more productive direction for concerns of ethics regarding Nike and its practices (production and branding). Our study identifies an additional dimension in entrepreneurship revealed through story-branding: the ethical inquiry into corporate answerability for the stories of Third World workers being branded. Entrepreneurs need to be held answerable for the highly compelling stories they tell, if indeed as we argue, such branding-stories do contribute to the imperial project through branding the people in the Third World that makes them voiceless and permits their exploitation. Our study prompts that key moment of reflexivity: *'I am the only one who can act, and if I don't act, no one will act. I am therefore complicit with what will happen next to the Other.'* In short, when Nike and the members of the Atlanta Program are the one who can act, and if they don't act, to ascertain the voice of the villagers in their own view of work, then those organizations are complicit in what has happened to the other. We therefore charge that the Atlanta Agreement, changed the labour practices, but not in ways that has benefited village labour. The Atlanta Agreement is therefore accountable, and responsible, for the consequences of its manner of storying-for-the-Other while the Other remained voiceless, and there needs to be redress

## CONCLUSION

Our paper brings into conversation two hitherto unconnected literatures: postcolonialism and branding in entrepreneurship studies. We examined from a

postcolonial subaltern perspective a particular case of a CSR initiative in the Third World undertaken by Nike as part of its branding efforts. Doing so, we feel we have made the following contributions.

First, we have expanded the margins of our knowledge on entrepreneurship and branding by making it more inclusive. We have opened it to the stories of Third World voices, in ways that will make the literature more emancipatory than the current situation. We hope this research effort will reduce the parochialism found in entrepreneurship studies that has largely ignored the Third World, especially the poor situated there.

Incorporating Third World voices has given us some new insights into entrepreneurship and branding. Story-branding helps us realize that entrepreneurship studies seem to be situated in a branding tunnel fixated on branding products and entrepreneurs forgetting the world outside the tunnel. The CSR initiatives, undertaken as part of a branding strategy by corporate entrepreneurial concerns, do not just help brand products, they end up branding a whole lot more (e.g., Third World workers). Examining story-branding reveals another face to branding activity than the face of freedom (i.e., positive associations of helping Third World workers) commonly given to it. We begin to see a darker and more menacing aspect to entrepreneurial branding, forged through stories about benign and constructive CSR initiatives in the Third World, when we refract them through the stories of voiceless Third World workers (the subalterns). From the subalterns, we see that CSR stories brand Third World labour, give them identifying marks that distort their realities and deceive Western consumer sentiment by branding Third World workers as happy and thankful for CSR's civilizing mission. Sweatshops thus appear as workshops and the entrepreneur is seen as a liberator and not a jailor of

Third World labour. A hegemonic order is created and the exploitation of the Third World continues. We bring to surface this imperial face of corporate entrepreneurial branding hitherto neglected and undertheorized in the literature.

Reflecting on branding's imperial face leads to other contributions in the paper. We see that this imperial face is dependent on subalternizing Third World workers whose voices can contest its representations. This subalternization requires power not just material (asymmetrical distribution of resources) but also cultural. And the cultural power it seems to draw upon is the culture of imperialism. The culture provides the scripts by which it is normal to ignore the 'natives' and to make decisions about them in the West. We feel that this connection and the relationship between imperialism's attitudes and branding in terms of how each depends and reproduces the other has not been articulated in an explicit fashion.

This connection is an exciting one for it leads to another contribution of our paper which is to identify an additional dimension in entrepreneurship story-branding: the ethical inquiry into corporate answerability for the stories of Third World workers being branded. To the extent that entrepreneurs brand the Other (Third World workers) in their for-the-Other stories in a manner that the Other remains voiceless while her realities are distorted, her priorities are ignored, and her dignity is injured, these entrepreneurs are accountable and responsible for these consequences produced by their storying. And there needs to be a redress.

In terms of future directions, the crucial question for story-telling answerability is how can voiceless workers gain voice? How can the subaltern speak? The real heroines are the working women in the apparel, footwear, and sports equipment factories. Can No

Sweat and Blackspot provide real alternatives to branding where Third World workers have narrative control and are not passive commodities fabricated for enhancing brand equity? Can the imperial face of branding be replaced by a new one based on solidarity and compassion? These are the questions to explore to bring about a new face to entrepreneurship and branding. A face that does not hide the horrors of a young woman worker in the Third World, but reveals a face in which all of us can see our most decent impulses.

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## NOTES

1. The validity of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's report was corroborated by evidence on Sialkot's soccer industry published prior to the crisis (e.g., Weiss, 1991) as well as later by numerous studies and surveys done by other independent organizations such as international NGOs (e.g., Save the Children and ILO), international trade unions and their Pakistani affiliates (e.g., International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and All Pakistan Federation of Labour) and local organizations (e.g., Raasta Development Consultants).

2. See Nike Press release dated 20 November 2006

<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/news/pressrelease.jhtml?year=2006&month=11&letter=>

[Retrieved on August 9, 2007]

3. Nike Press Release dated 24 May 2007

<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/news/pressrelease.jhtml?year=2007&month=05&letter=h>

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